

THE LUTHERAN HOME SOUTHBURY

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Written testimony of Yvette Dobruck, Administrator, Lutheran Home Southbury concerning the Governor's Recommended SFY 2023 Budget Revisions for Connecticut Nursing Homes

Good afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker and to the members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Yvette Dobruck. I am the Administrator at Lutheran Home Southbury, in Southbury, Connecticut. Lutheran Home has been serving the elderly in our community for over 100 years. We are a 120 bed nursing home and have 14 Residential Care Beds, and we have 217 employees working at our facility, and we are members of the Connecticut Association of Health Care Facilities (CAHCF).

A Period of Trauma *and* Resilience for our Nursing Home Residents and Caregivers

Now two years into this unrelenting COVID-19 pandemic and public health emergency and I can say that our nursing home, the residents we serve, and our employees, continue to be challenged like in no other time in our history of providing services in Connecticut. I can *also* say that our nursing home is as determined as ever, and we feel that each week we are getting closer to a time when we can say the pandemic is behind us.

Our residents and staff have experienced and dealt with nearly every feature of the pandemic from the very beginning in the Spring of 2020 when the misunderstood virus was spreading through persons showing no symptoms, and especially in regions of Connecticut experiencing high rates of community prevalence, to the most recent Omicron outbreaks experienced almost every Connecticut nursing homes. We saw first-hand the consequences of a lack of COVID-19 testing capacity in the United States and here in Connecticut, the extreme shortages of PPE, and the ever-changing CDC, CMS and DPH guidance policies that evolved as the virus became better understood in the medical, academic and scientific communities. We experienced the severe and emotionally devastating visitor restrictions imposed early in the pandemic, and we have experienced the optimism of what the COVID-19 vaccine, and now the booster, means to our community. While the trauma our residents and caretakers faced was extraordinary, I can say that their resilience and determination was equally extraordinary.

Severe Staffing Shortages is Hindering Admissions, Increasing Labor Costs and Slowing the Nursing Home Recovery Plan

The severe staffing shortages our nursing home faces is far and above the most significant challenge we are dealing with at this stage of the pandemic.

The staffing shortages our nursing homes are experiencing are like no other time in all of our years of providing skilled nursing home services. On a daily basis, we are forced to use staff to resident ratios that would normally be utilized exclusively for the 11-7 shift.

The staffing shortages have been so significant that our nursing home routinely is unable to accommodate admissions from hospitals as we are not be able to address the care needs of additional residents without staff. This was particularly prevalent during the holidays and immediately after.

Consequently, the occupancy in our buildings is much lower than normal, but the low number is really a distortion caused by the staffing shortages and how it impacts admissions and occupancy levels. It's not at all a true reflection of the need or demand for our services, but it is a reality. Severe revenue losses have impacted the building and in turn impact on the quality of care to our residents. We fully expect to improve over time as the staffing situation improves, but we are concerned that this will be a slow process, perhaps years long, as our state and overall health care system recovers from the pandemic. Our nursing home's labor-related costs began an unprecedented dramatic rise last fall and is showing no sign of relenting. With the need to use pick up bonuses, we are spending anywhere from \$7,000-\$10,000 per week to obtain minimum staffing levels. This does not include the cost of retention bonuses, paying for C.N.A. Training or the additional wage increases that we did earlier in the year.

Nursing Staffing Pools and Negative Impact on Care and Increased Costs

Our nursing home have been very negatively impacted by the staffing shortages in so many ways, but the impact of having to turn to nursing staffing agencies, has been particularly troublesome. Using these nurse staffing pool agencies has been a measure of last resort at our nursing home. From a patient care perspective, it runs counter to the consistent assignment of staff to our residents that has been our longstanding practice. However, like so many other nursing homes we have had to utilize this option. We did like so many other nursing homes and obtained contracts. However, in many pockets in the state, the agencies do not have staff to give us. This was our situation during and after the holidays. While utilizing agency is never a good option, we could not obtain staff, despite having contracts with several agencies.

We are also concerned about the COVID-19 staff booster mandate now extended to March 7, 2022 how the staffing situation will be worsened if we have staff layoffs as a result. While we achieved 100% compliance with the primary staff vaccine regimen, unfortunately we are having a much more challenging time with the booster. This is consistent with what our colleagues are experiencing across the healthcare spectrum and the reasons are diverse and complex. But whatever the reasons, we are very concerned that much more time will be needed. We cannot afford to remove any staff from the schedule, yet we will be forced to do so because there are many who do not want the booster. This just adds another layer of difficulty to an already devastating situation.

The Connecticut General Assembly has provided a Lifeline of Nursing Home Support, But the Staffing Issues Remain Unaddressed

Before closing, we must thank the state legislature for the tremendous support we have received that has provided additional support for our employees and stability during this period. Our nursing home faithfully implemented the employee wage enhancements adopted last session, and moving forward with additional health

care and pension benefits adopted last session as well---these are critically important employee recruitment and retention resources, but more help is needed to further bolster employee wages and benefits and in additional financial rate relief to address the extraordinary increased labor costs now being experienced and not reflected in any of the prior support we have received.

Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

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